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Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

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DESIGNER GENES



“Who’s the girl in the red dress?” I asked Hannah as we walked the poorly lit corridor of the Pathology Building.

The year was 1947, my first year in medical school, in Lodz, Poland. I was not in the best physical shape since I was covered with small abscesses, which disappeared and reappeared with a mind of their own. My doctor stated that the multiple purulent craters were a minor cosmetic disease, which he treated with a tar-like pungent ointment. The ancient remedy didn’t help, but it always provided a free space around me in the most crowded places. I saw a weak interest in the doctor’s eye while he had examined my bleeding gums.

“Oho! Scurvy! Eat fruits, child,” he announced in an almost cheerful tone.

Fruits! In the winter? In 1947?

I shook my head. “I have a peptic ulcer and fruits cause a stomach ache,” I said in a thin voice.

The good doctor was irritated with the litany of minor illnesses and moved impatiently in the chair.

“Drink milk, child. Next patient, please.”

But I was still better off than Hannah who had lost a good deal of her hair in the concentration camp and whose scalp shone through the thin remaining strands. I was lucky to have survived the war and I shouldn’t have bothered the doctor with furunculosis, shaky teeth, and a dull pain in the belly.

I was too thin and Hannah was too bloated. We carried the memories of the ghettos and death camps and we smiled uneasy smiles or rather half-smiles or else we were boringly, deadly serious. We wore expressions as if to say, “Don’t-be-too-happy-expect-a-disaster-every-minute-of-your-life.” We were odd looking specimens dressed in a hodgepodge of clothing, handed down by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency.

But the student in the red dress was different. The golden tan of her unblemished face matched the smiling, sky-blue eyes and the blond, straight, thick hair that formed a golden cask around her head. It was a glorious head untouched by powder, lipstick, or make-up. She smiled and listened attentively to an assistant in pathology and he in turn couldn’t take his eyes off her. Other students had paused in their conversations to look at her.

“Who’s she? What’s her name? Is she an actress playing a medical student?” I again asked the well informed Hannah.

“That’s Ola Kohn. She’s the youngest student in the school and so far she has the best grades. The hospital of internal diseases was named after her grandfather, Dr. Jacob Kohn. Her father was a well known criminal lawyer and Ola inherited her mother’s beauty.” All these facts Hannah delivered in one breath.

"It figures." I said, a high dose of jealousy in my voice. "She has the perfect genes."

My interest in Ola remained high and I accosted her in the cinema house, 'Polonia.'

"Servus Ola. I'm Sally," I said holding out my hand, "I missed inorganic chemistry classes and I'd like to borrow your notes."

"Sure." She smiled a smile that disappeared slowly and lingered in her eyes. "But my notes are short. I'm sick and tired of these lectures given in movie houses. Yesterday we had physiology classes in the Symphony Hall and our professor, with his long hair, looked like a Toscanini talking about thyroid disease. At least the hall is warm and bright, but the movie houses are damp, dark, dirty, and cold. Will they ever build a university with real lecture halls?"

"First the government must rebuild Warsaw, then Gdansk, later Wroclaw, and Stetin. Our grandchildren will attend chemistry classes in the 'Polonia'."

"You're a real optimist." She tilted her head and smiled.

"Let's study together," I said using all my social grace. "I am a speed-writer and I make excellent notes. I have some textbooks, too, and we might form a terrific team."

"Fine, fine. Fantastic." Ola clasped her hands and in that moment of her childish delight, I was struck by the sweetness and innocence of her seventeen years. I was only three years older but inside me was a worried oldness and I could never smile the way Ola did.

Soon we were an inseparable duo. I made tons of notes while Ola wrote a few sentences, for she remembered most of the lecture.

"Ola," I said with unmasked envy, "did the gift of 'oral' memory pass along to you with your paternal chromosomes?"

"It's not hereditary. It's an acquired quality. A long time ago I learned to listen and to remember," she said and smiled.

Between the second and third year of medical school, the furuncles and scurvy made a quick exit precipitated by Ola's decisive action. She ordered, "Stop taking the antediluvian ointment, I'll buy penicillin on the black market."

The injection of the thick, yellowish, glue-like antibiotic into my glutei was like a red-hot nail penetrating my muscles and many times I preferred to be left alone with the painless furuncles. But when they vanished leaving silvery, star-like scars, I said to Ola, "I can't pay you back, but all the stars belong to you."

"It is a good omen for my future practice, stars instead of money." She touched the big scar on the back of my neck and declared, "My necklace will conceal it nicely."

Ola graduated from medical school summa cum laude, I without any "laude." We both chose internal medicine as our specialty.

In the vernacular of the time, we expressed our ultimate disgust or contempt in a single word, "cholera." And "cholera" we said to the political system in Poland in 1957 when we had decided to leave. Our ways parted; hers led to Israel and mine to the USA.

"You'll write letters to me?" I asked a moronic question for I knew well that she'd never write. "I'm going to miss you very much." I understated my feelings with this banal phrase.

"I'll miss you too," she said smiling.

I wrote letters. "Ola; 'the' is an unpronounceable nightmare. My lips, tongue, and vocal cords refuse to make this 'the' sound. Kind Americans say that I have a charming accent while at the same time they are tilting one ear toward me in order to understand the cacophony of English coming from my Polish-oriented mouth. Don't condemn me, for I abandoned internal medicine for anesthesia."

The phone rang as soon as Ola could afford to pay for long distance calls.

"Sally?" An echo was dancing on the old wire, ". . ally . . ally . . Don't cry over an accent. I started from scratch with a new alphabet. The kingdom of internal medicine is divided into many provinces and I am now specializing in the wonder of the 'pump.' I love you from the bottom of my 'pump'."

Over the years, the wire lost the echo and Ola's voice became gravelly and raspy. During the wars and many military actions in Israel, my telephone bills raised husband's eyebrows, but in time of peace I was driven by guilt of the unwritten letters I composed in my head but never sent out.

In the mid-seventies the phone rang and the familiar voice, without the troubling echo said, "We're coming to New York for a year. Ignaz took a sabbatical at New York University."

"Great, great." I said. I had waited a long time for her visit.

I mapped out in my head a tour of New York for them. No, I decided, not the triviality of the Empire State Building or the faded symbolism of the Statue of Liberty. We'd start at the triangle of Lincoln Center with the Metropolitan Opera at its apex. Then we'd walk to the Museum of Modern Art and I'd show them Central Park, the Plaza Hotel, the Metropolitan Museum. I'd take Ola to the weekly meeting of the cardiology section in my hospital and I saw us sitting in the hospital cafeteria during the lunch hours. I already smelled the familiar aroma of the hospital meals.

In a state of elation, I greeted her at the Kennedy airport. I scanned her face which wasn't very much affected by age. Its fine structure and good features remained unchanged, but her dark glasses somehow divided us like a heavy curtain.

"I have an allergy to dust and the glasses protect my eyes. I slept poorly in the plane. Do you have a sleeping pill?" she asked. I replied: "No, I don't. Since when did you start smoking?" I looked at the cigarette in her hand.

"Everyone smokes in Israel. We're all living in a war zone. Do you have any Valium?" she asked. "No, I don't."

"I'll call you soon." She hurried out of the airport and promised to call. But she didn't. I kept calling but in the morning she was asleep, in the afternoon she was taking a nap, and at night she was too tired to meet me. After a week of futile efforts to see her, I finally reached her by phone.

"Cholera! You owe me an explanation. Did I do something wrong?"

We arranged to meet in an obscure luncheonette on the Upper East Side. I disliked the place as soon as I pushed open the dirty door, but I ordered a cup of coffee from the waitress who kept a toothpick in her mouth.

"Ola," I said without pausing for small talk, "what's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong," she started hesitantly, stopped and started again, "but I'm not feeling well lately and I'm an insomniac. I think more and more about the past. Why didn't we ever talk of the war?"

"I couldn't. You made a smooth transition after war . . ."

She interrupted sharply. "None of us survived the war 'smoothly.' I was on the Aryan side, in a little village, near Warsaw. Our lives on the Aryan side hinged on the color of our hair, shape of our nose, intonation of our voices, and a thousand little factors of which the most important was luck. I was the lucky eleven year old blond girl with blue eyes and a snub nose. I blended well among the Poles. My aunt and uncle weren't so lucky, since they had the kind of a pale skin which turns brown with the first rays of sun and their hair and eyes were black. They were hidden by the Poles in the attic, a windowless cubbyhole with a camouflaged entrance. Their one year old daughter was separated from the high risk parents and adopted by a childless Polish family. My blond, beautiful, and fearless mother was the master-mind of this elaborate plan of survival and every Sunday she brought money to the Poles for our upkeep. I was supposed to be a war orphan and I called her Mrs. Rolsky. Every night I visited my aunt and uncle in the attic and they gave me lessons in math, history, Latin, and physics. We didn't have pencils or paper and I did my homework in my head while I worked in the fields, milked the cows or cleaned the house. For three years they continued the oral teaching and slowly they replaced my parents. Mrs. Rolsky faded away as my mother. A few months before the liberation, the Gestapo came straight to the attic and shot my uncle and my aunt in the courtyard. I saw the execution from the window and crawled under the bed. The Polish woman told my mother when she came for her usual Sunday visit, 'Take the girl with you. NOW! She's crying and she looks like a Jewish child. I can't help you anymore. The Gestapo arrested my husband.' My mother wiped the tears from my eyes and said imploringly 'Ola, you have some chance to survive. The end of the war is near. Smile, smile. You must look livelier and merrier. Your eyes should give nothing away about yourself. I promise that we'll cry together after the war and we'll take the baby home.' After the war, my mother left the baby with the adopted parents for she believed that the little girl would be better off not knowing of her Jewish origins and the parents' fate. I kept smiling till I couldn't smile anymore."

Two rivulets of tears came down her cheeks and I instinctively removed her dark glasses. The whites of her eyes were crisscrossed by a fine net of tortuous red vessels, the iris had a glazed blue color and the pupils: I recognized the familiar pin-pointed pupils of the overdosed patients in the emergency rooms into whose collapsed lungs I pumped liters of oxygen. A glassy eyed junkie named Ola was looking at me. I turned my gaze from her face and said, "I have to go home."

I drove home hunched over the steering wheel and I noticed from the corner of my eyes the dirty papers flying high in the wind. I saw people in rags poking in the trash cans with sticks and drinking from brown paper bags. I looked at the hostile faces of the rush-hour drivers and I felt acid regurgitating in my mouth. A concentrated hate exploded inside me.

"Cholera at you, New York."

"Cholera with you, Ola."

Two days later the phone rang.

"Sally," she said "I wanted to tell you . . ."

"I'm on call." I stopped her in the mid-sentence, ice in my voice. I listened to her and all I could think was, "junkie, junkie."

"I'll call you some other time," Ola said.

Several days later somebody called and without giving a name left a message.

"Ola committed suicide. No funeral services. She donated her body to medical research." I was then on call again and I was very busy all night in the operating room, but the next day I didn't recall the cases. I went to see Ola's husband.

"Ignaz," I said and I had to squeeze the words through a constricted throat. "I failed her. She called and I didn't let her talk to me. I could have saved her if I hadn't been such a damn righteous person. I didn't let her talk." I repeated it again and again, for the click of the phone and the silence hanging on the wire still sounded in my ears.

"No, Sally, nobody could have saved Ola," he said and I noticed a deadly tiredness in his face. "She was depressed and was hospitalized and treated. She warded off the depression by intoxicating herself with Demerol, Valium, and Nembutal. Death was for her a better solution, more desired than her present existence. She left a letter for you."

"Sally," she wrote. "It took years to find my cousin's address, but I was too much of a wreck to write a letter. Give her my ring and ask her to forgive me." The ring was lost during the police investigation and the letters Sally sent to Poland came back stamped "Addressee unknown."

Questions

1. Where does her appearance conceal, and where reveal, Ola's true self?
2. Would you agree that Nazi Germany has claimed another victim?
3. What is the significance of the returned letters?
4. What do Dr. Kape's "brown paper bags" in New York City bring out in the story? In what ways do they differ from Hurston's "brown bag" of miscellany?
5. Since its two central characters are adults, why was this story printed in the *Newsletter of the International Study of Organized Persecution of Children* (2.1, Spring-Summer 1994, published by Child Development Research)?

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